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ABSTRACT

Control of private life and involvement in public life is regarded as an important condition of subjective well-being, especially for adolescents. A survey on control attributions was administered to 1,902 adolescents between the ages of 14 and 20 in Switzerland. The survey included a separate questionnaire designed to provide six measures of perceived quality of life. Subjects were instructed to imagine a concrete situation of an indicated kind and then to answer 12 questions. This process was repeated for a total of nine issues in the personal, interpersonal, and societal domains. The results revealed that subjects were most bothered by the future working place and personality development issues and least bothered by the issue of public youth projects. Money was the only issue that was more important to male adolescents than to females. Most adolescents reported feeling that they had control or participated in the control over the selected issues. As expected, general life satisfaction depended heavily on the feeling of control. This was found to be especially true for the issues of personal appearance, personality development, and friendship. Having no control over issues within the societal domain did not significantly affect the general satisfaction. (NB)

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Attribution of control in Swiss adolescents

Contribution to the IXth Biennial meetings of the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development. Tokyo, July, 12-16, 1987.

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Control of private life and involvment in public life is regarded as an important condition of subjective well-being. This appears especially true for adolescents. The authors understand certain society-shaking riots by adolescents in Switzerland in the early 1980's as an expression of a general subjective loss of control.

Thus, a survey on control attribution by Swiss adolescents with both a cross-sectional and a longitudinal perspective was initiated in 1986. It is based on a self-made questionnaire which differentiates the concept of control as follows:

(1) The attribution of control is considered to vary differently within three 'domains', i.e., personal, interpersonal, and societal. Each domain was represented by selected 'issues'.
(2) For each issue the same series of questions was presented, i.e., personal control (actual, future, comparison with peers), distribution of control (other participants in control, barriers to personal control, 'objective' controllability), and importance (of the domain, of the control of the issue; personal effort to maintain or to gain control).
Only a small section of the data is included in this contribution.

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The sample consisted of 1902 adolescents between 14 and 20 years, i.e., 168 primary school students, 594 secondary school students, 429 College students, 635 adolescents in vocational training and 57 youths who have left schooling at all and are working. The analysis further takes into account different living areas (urban, suburban, country) as well as their parents' socio-economic status. The survey included a separate questionnaire designed to provide six measures of perceived quality of life.

The issues were introduced by inviting the subject to imagine a concrete situation of an indicated kind; example ('personal appearance' = AP): "You are looking at yourself before the mirror, your eyes, your face, your hair, your whole body. You might find yourself attractive or not so much. How much can you contribute yourself as to how you look like?" After this introduction a series of 12 questions on this issue followed. All subjects had to go through the nine issues, each containing the same series of 12 questions. The nine issues are indicated on Sheet no. 3.

Index 1:
The nine issues:

Personal domain:

PE = personality development
MO = money, personal financial ressources
AP = personal appearance

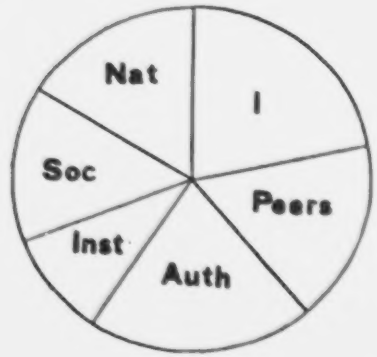
Interpersonal domain:

FR = friendship
CP = conflict with parents

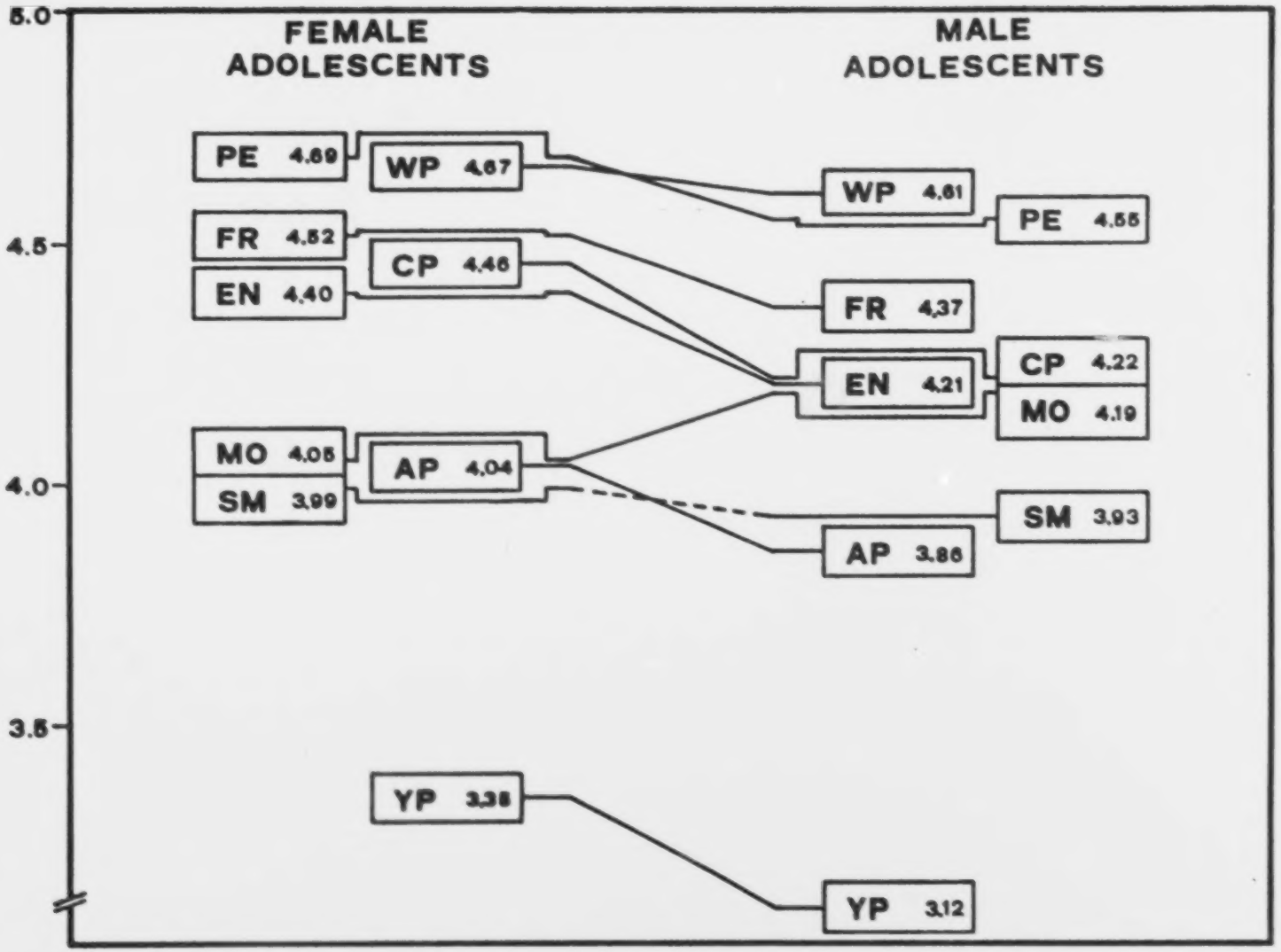
Societal domain:

EN = natural environment
YP = public youth project
WP = future working place
SM = subjectmatter in school or in apprenticeship

Index 2:
Classes of potential control holders:

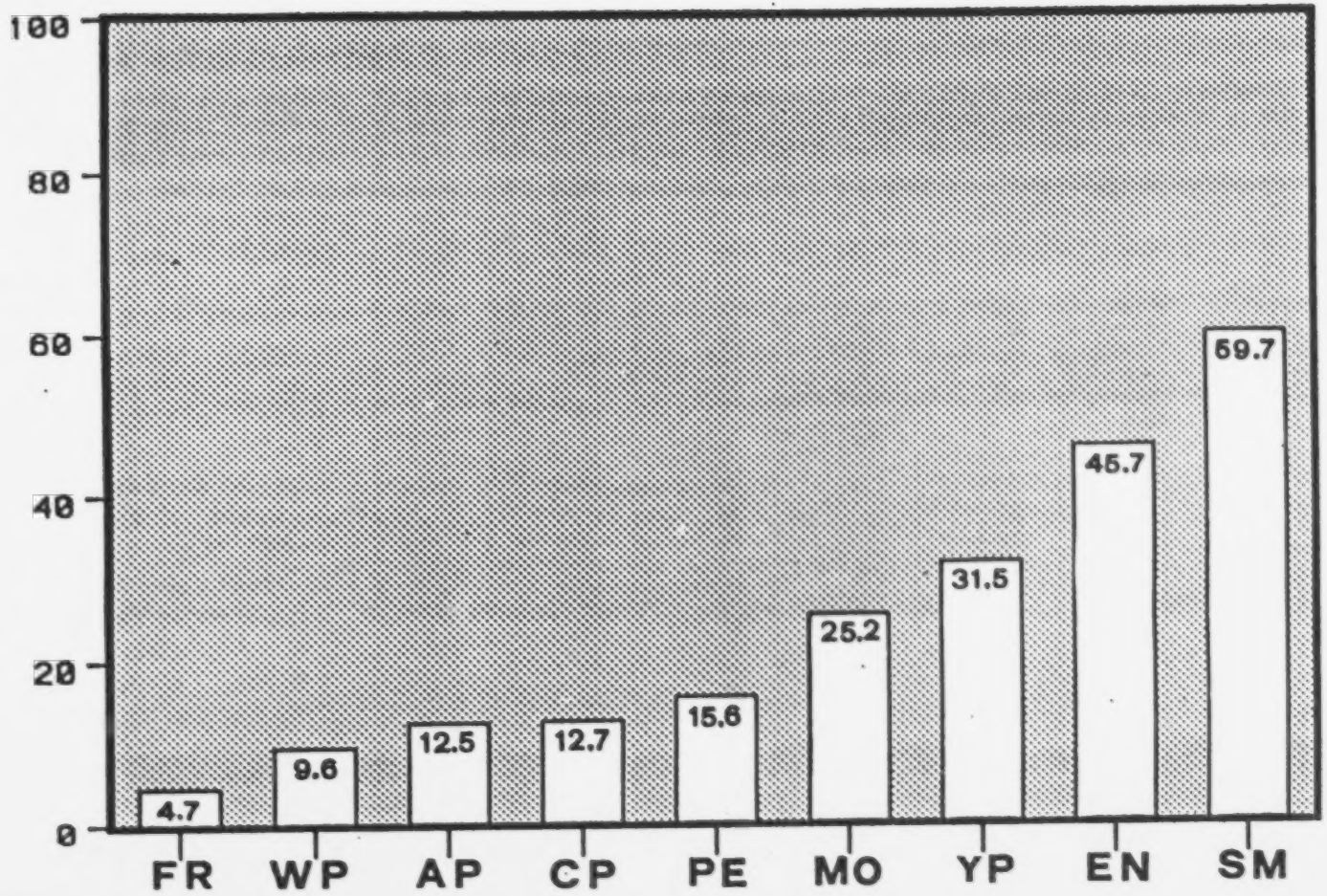


Peers: Person with same status, peer group
Auth: Person with higher status, authorities
Inst: Institutions
Soc: Society
Nat: Nature (therein chance, fate)



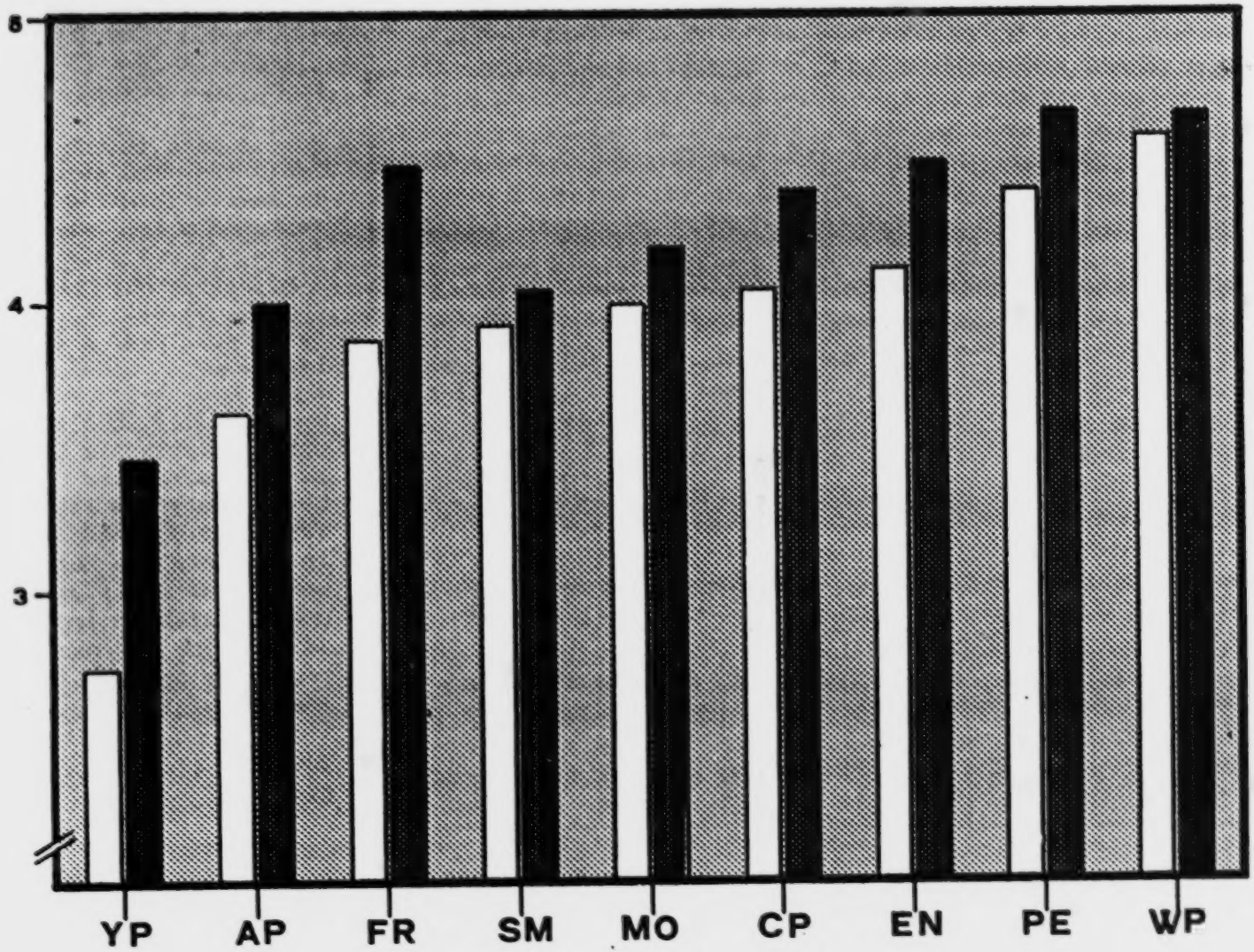
The ratings for the importance of the issues varied between the nine issues, but did not vary much between the age groups. This Figure gives the average ratings over the nine issues and both sexes (5 = maximum, 1 = minimum).

The future working place and the personality development bother most all subjects, public youth projects bother least. Money is the only issue which is more important to the male adolescents than the female.



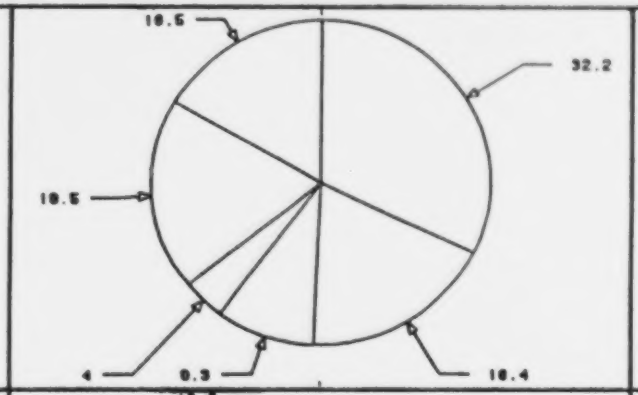
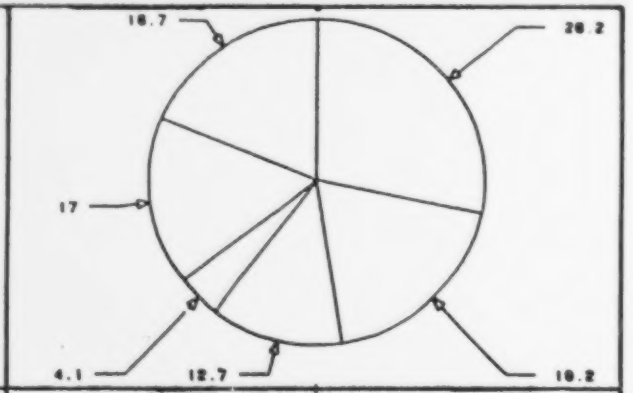
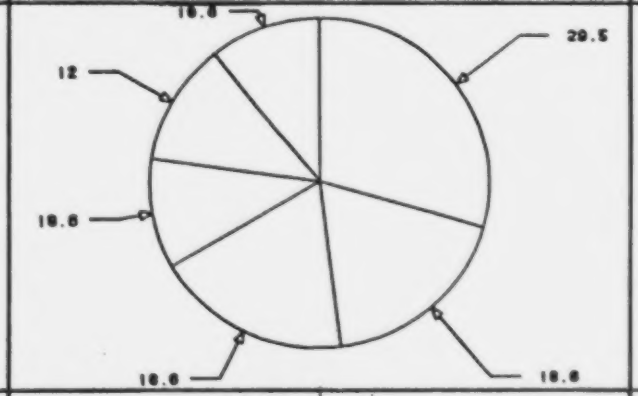
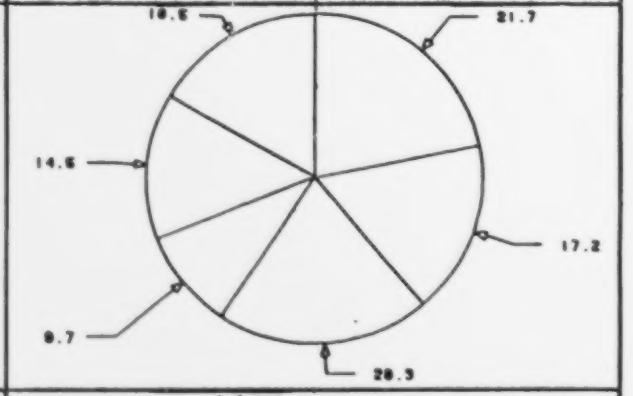
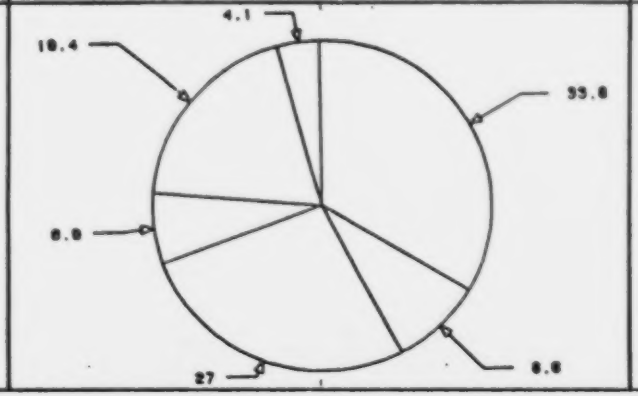
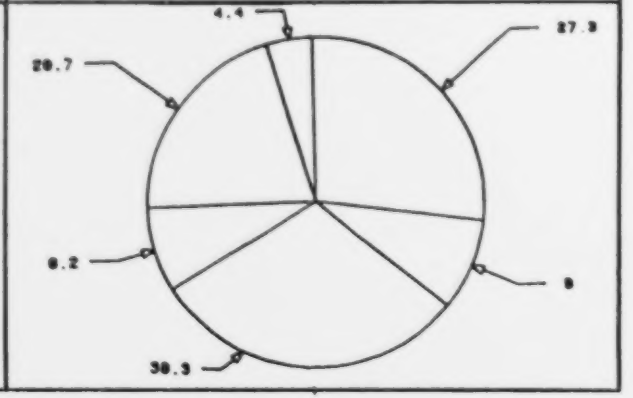
Most adolescents feel they have control or participate in the control over the selected issues. This Figure represents the percentages of subjects feeling they have 'no' control at all or 'rather none' over a given issue.

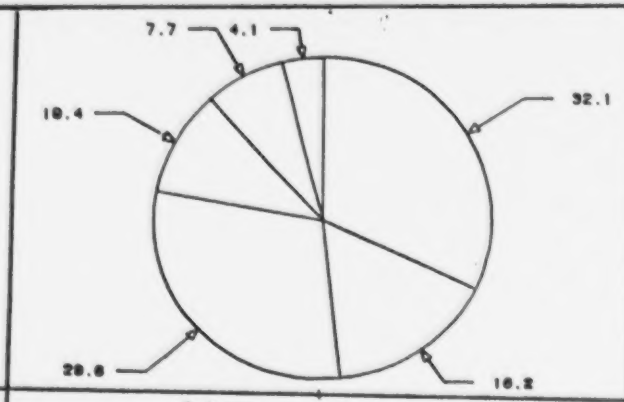
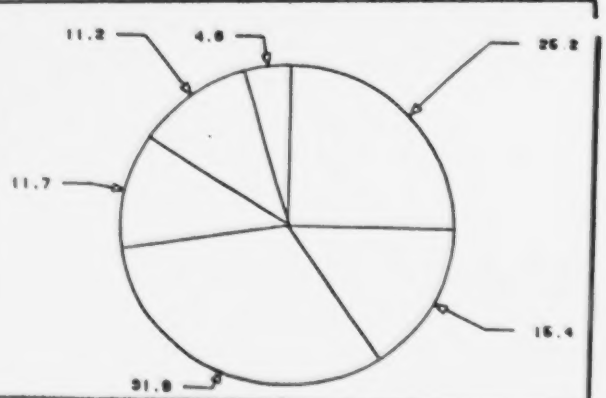
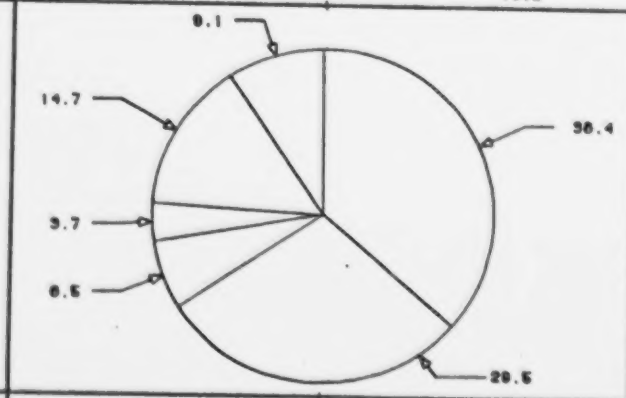
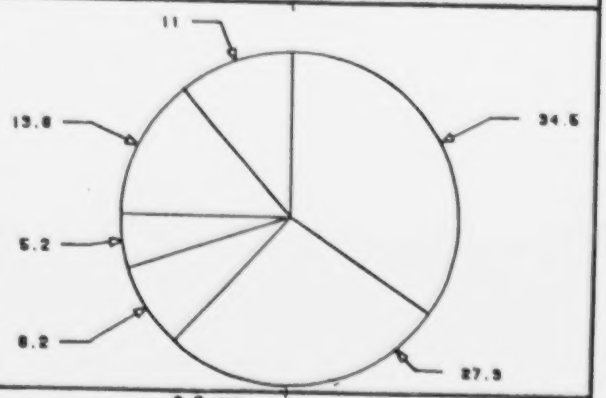
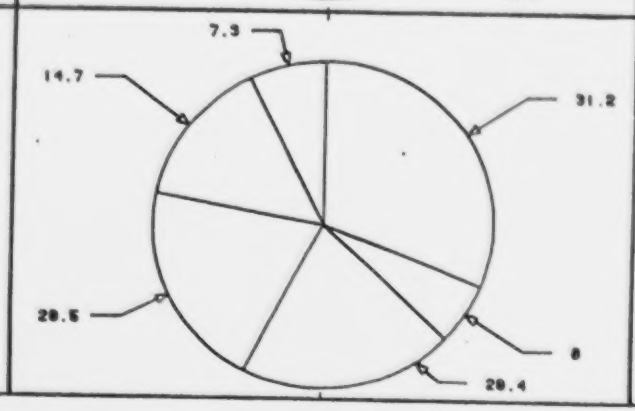
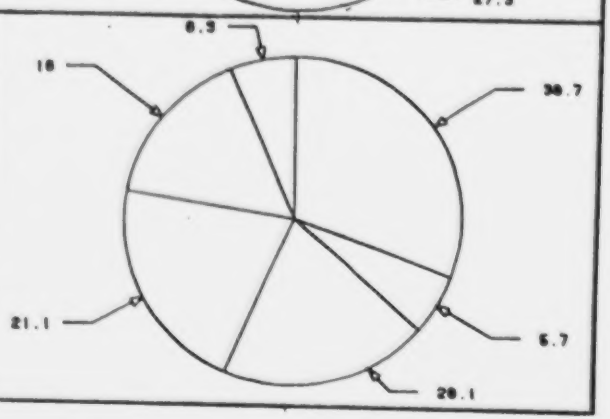
Control over scholastic subject-matter is generally perceived as being very low (though important!), and this in subjects who for the most part still go to school! High control in FR may be a healthy compensation as well as the optimistic estimation of control in the future (!) working place.

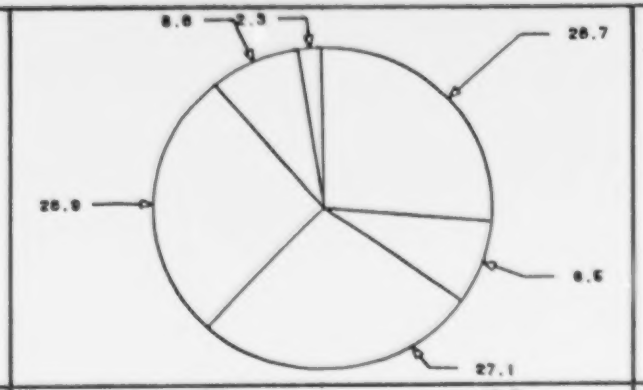
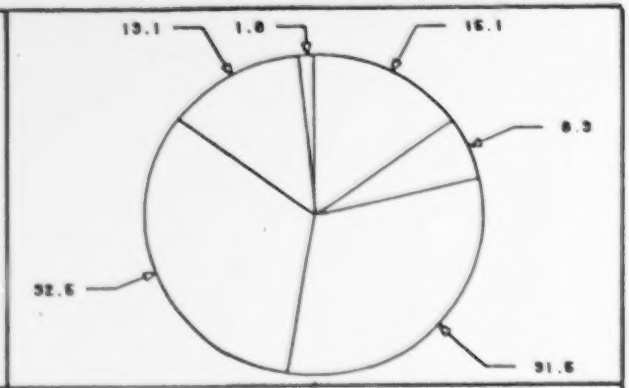
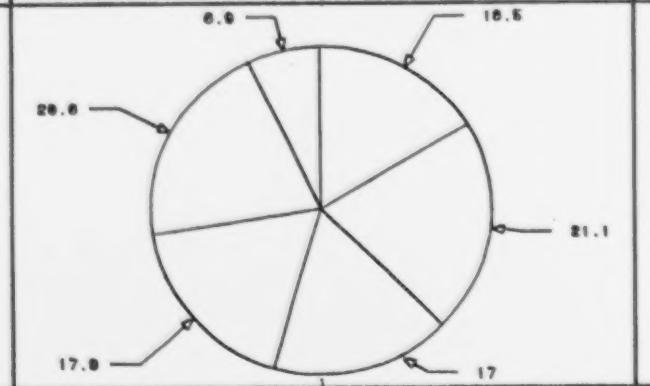
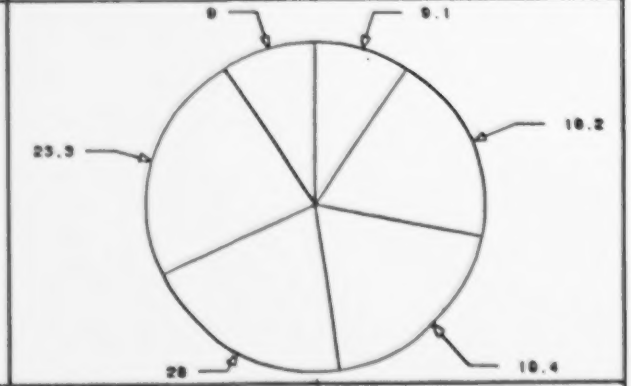
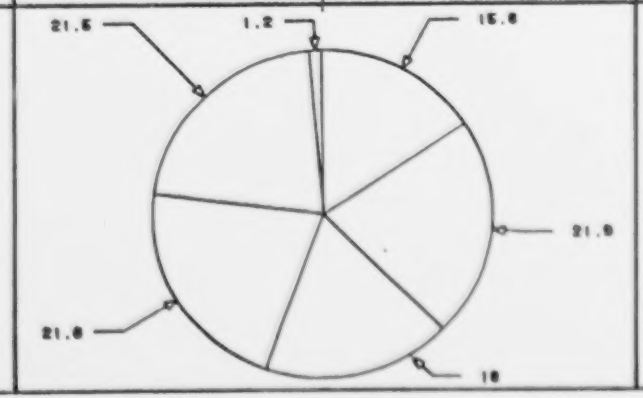
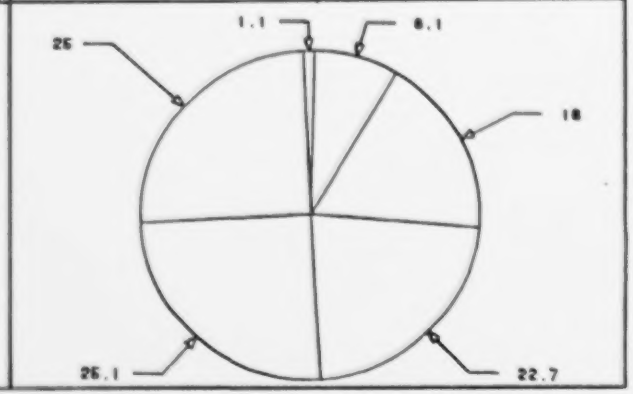


Not feeling to be in control is not consequential in those issues which are not judged to be important ones. This Figure shows that subjects who feel that they participate substantially in the control generally rate the issue as more important (dashed columns) than the subjects who are subjectively lacking control (white columns).

The difference is highest in YP; does it mean that only those subjects attributing importance to YP care for control (and therefore perceive it)? The second highest difference is in FR; does it mean that suffering from lack of control in FR is most painful and therefore the importance downplayed most often?

	control	no control
AP		
PE		
MO		

CP	 7.7 4.1 32.1 18.4 28.8 18.2	 11.2 4.8 26.2 11.7 15.4 31.8
FR	 9.1 14.7 30.4 5.7 6.5 29.5	 11 13.8 34.5 5.2 8.2 27.3
WP	 7.3 14.7 31.2 29.5 8 29.4	 8.3 18 38.7 21.1 5.7 28.1

SM		
EN		
YP		

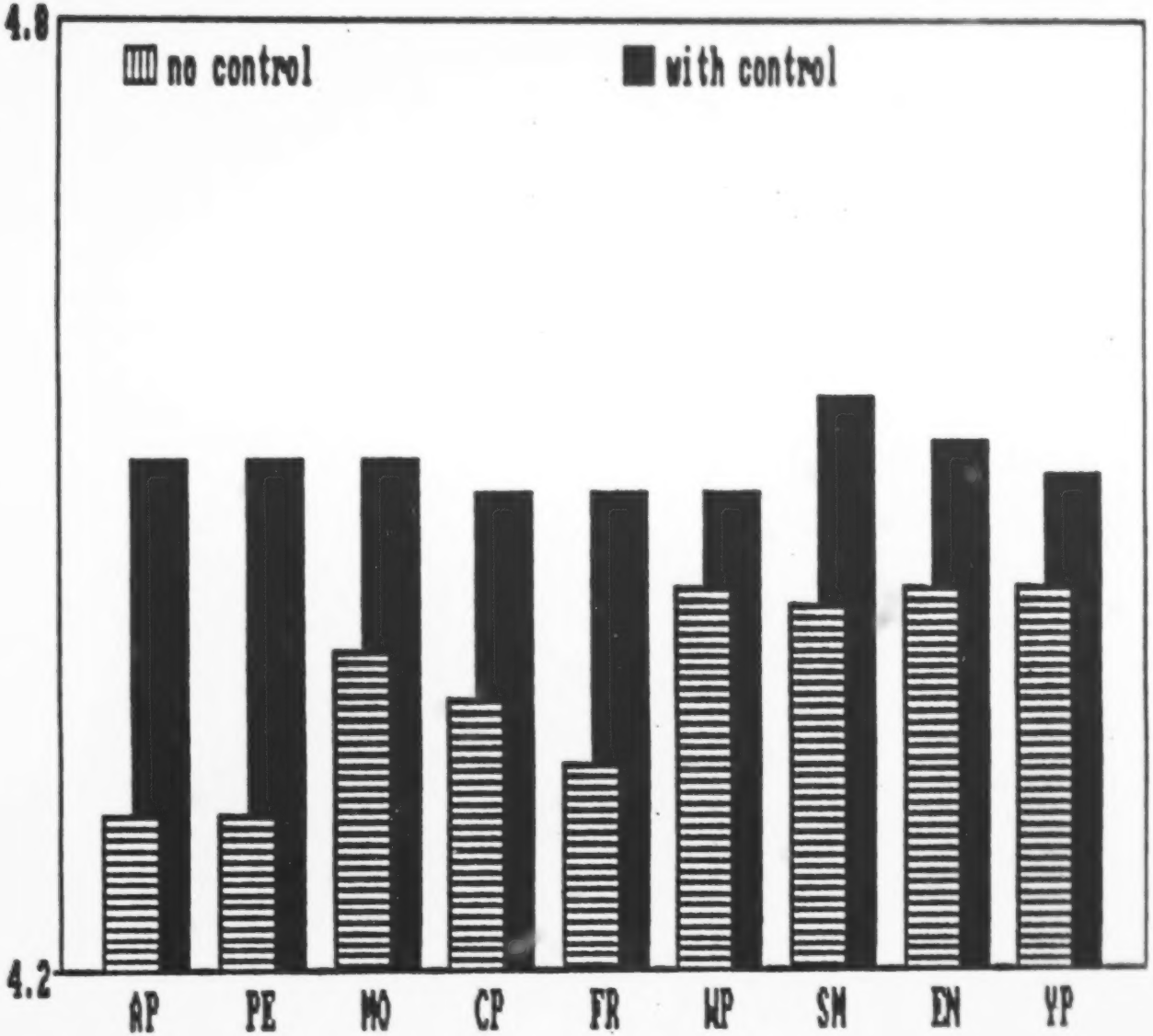
The above pie-charts show the attributed distribution of control both over the nine issues and the subjects feeling no (or rather no) personal control and those feeling a substantial part in control (separate question, see Figure on Sheet 5). The meaning of the colors is indicated on Sheet 3.

This Table shows the most important control holder over age (for index refer to the low left Figure; the numbers represent the number of subjects for whom the given control holder is mentioned as maximum control holder). While younger subjects hold the teacher or the school director responsible for the curricula, the older subjects see the control in (rather anonymous) institutions. Comparable shift in EN: While younger subjects see single people responsible for the natural environment, the older attribute it to the (complex and intransparent) society.

	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Appearance	I 59.6	I 67.0	I 62.7	I 58.6	I 61.3	I 66.4	I 67.4
Personality	I 66.1	I 73.6	I 70.5	I 68.7	I 61.9	I 70.8	I 60.5
Money	I 48.0	I 50.5	I 52.1	I 57.0	I 57.8	I 63.1	I 66.4
Conflict with parents	Auth 52.5	I 52.8	I 48.9	I 53.8	I 53.1	I 56.2	I 56.6
Friendship	I 82.6	I 80.8	I 78.7	I 77.9	I 77.0	I 78.0	I 78.7
Working place	I 71.0	I 77.4	I 73.9	I 71.1	I 72.9	I 69.2	I 66.2
Subjectmatter	Auth 44.3	Auth 39.5	Auth 41.2	Inst 40.2	Inst 55.0	Inst 62.6	Inst 55.5
Environment	Peers 26.8	Peers 29.8	Soc 33.7	Soc 42.2	Soc 48.3	Soc 52.1	Soc 50.4
Youth project	Peers 28.2	Soc 30.5	Inst 31.8	Inst 31.6	Soc 26.8	Inst 28.3	Peers 28.1

If a subject has ('rather') 'no' control over an issue, then it might be that he or she regards the issue as basically uncontrollable (by anyone). This Table shows the percentages of those subjects who profess this conviction of uncontrollability.
Most subjects lacking of control still believe the issue is controllable; it is just not them who have the control! It is surprising how much they perceive the natural environment is controllable at all although they participate little in it (cf. Figure on Sheet 9). Scholastic subject-matter is considered as the least controllable at all! Furthermore, those who feel not being in control of their appearance and of their personality development may feel so because of a conviction of general uncontrollability of these issues.

	All subjects	Subjects feeling no control		Subjects feeling no control and believing in incontrollability		
	N	n	%	n	% of all subj.	% of no-con. subj.
Friendship	1814	125	6.9	35	1.9	28.0
Working place	1879	245	13.0	42	2.2	17.1
Conflict w. parents	1880	284	15.1	47	2.5	16.5
Money	1748	380	21.7	52	3.0	13.7
Youth project	1759	523	29.7	54	3.1	10.3
Environment	1870	833	44.6	77	4.1	9.2
Appearance	1885	317	16.8	93	4.9	29.3
Personality	1864	306	16.4	130	7.0	42.1
Subjectmatter	1838	986	53.7	183	10.0	18.6



As expected, the general life satisfaction depends heavily on the feeling of control (or else: General life satisfaction determines whether one estimates optimistically his or her own control or not...). This is especially true for the issues of personal appearance, personality development, and friendship. Having no control over issues within the societal domain does not affect greatly the general satisfaction.